Seventeenth Century Massachusetts Politics

by

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A Dissertation Prospectus Submitted to the
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The topic of this dissertation will be the structure of politics in the colony of Massachusetts Bay in the Seventeenth century. The terminal dates are obvious. In 1630 John Winthrop set out in the New World with a royal charter--the basis of the future government firmly in his grasp. In 1686 that same charter ceased to be operative and Massachusetts became part of the Dominion of New England. It will be the purpose of this dissertation to analyse the political structure which prevailed in the colony during the intervening fifty-six years.

It is my intention to divide the work into two main sections. The first will attempt to answer the question: Who were the politicians? The second will investigate whether these politicians divided into recognizable groups, and if so, what were the bases of these divisions. The first question can be answered by the compilation of a list of political figures--those who served in the offices of governor, deputy governor, assistant, and those elected by the various towns to serve as deputies to the General Court; and the collection of certain vital information concerning them. This information should indicate the family connections, economic standing, and political activity of the political figures. I have already compiled such a list and have found it to contain approximately four hundred names. It was my original intention to collect capsule biographies of only the most important figures--governors, deputy governors, assistants and those deputies who had served in the General Court ten or more times with a significant sampling of those who served five to ten times. Further investigation has revealed that this would give me a distorted picture since the vast majority of those re-elected with frequency to the Court were from the older more established towns. The newer towns changed their delegates frequently. I also suspect that the deputies sent by the infant towns were occasionally

and socially different sorts of men. It is my opinion that at least a very large sampling of those who sat only once or twice in the General Court will be necessary.

The sources available for the collection of this biographical information are numerous. The family connections can be traced through the use of town histories, general genealogical works such as those of James Savage, and by the use of the various family genealogies. The facts concerning a man's political activities can be found in the colony records and the various town records, both published and unpublished. I will be concerned mainly with the offices held by each individual in the town and colony. The economic standing of each man can be traced in such sources as proprietor's records--books of possessions, tax lists, and wills. A search in the probate records of two counties--Suffolk and Essex--has already revealed the wills and inventories of one hundred-ten of the first two hundred on my list, and I have not yet investigated the records of Norfolk, Middlesex and Hampshire counties.

These biographies should enable me to answer certain questions: What were the qualifications for certain offices? Is there a certain formula which would enable me to figure out who could be elected to these offices? Were there families which dominated politics on a local or colony-wide level? This information should also allow me to answer basic questions concerning members of the House of Deputies. Who were the deputies? And what were their economic and social backgrounds? I should be able to answer the same sort of questions concerning the town politicians. I should be able to trace any sort of relationship between town and colony offices. Were the men who ruled the colony

the same men as those who ran the town? Was town office, for example, that of selectman, a stepping stone to the more prominent position of serving the colony in the General Court?

The second part of the dissertation will concern itself with how the politicians divided among themselves. In this section I must determine whether there were any recognizable political groupings prior to 1660, and whether the usually accepted division of puritan and moderate parties in the post 1660 period has any validity. This section will depend heavily upon the biographical information provided in the first part of the dissertation. It will be hampered greatly, however, by a lack of information. The most serious problem will be the failure of the colony records to indicate how each member of the General Court voted on a particular issue. The records indicate only that the particular piece of legislation was to be enacted. In a few instances those who dissented in the passage of a statute would insist that their dissent be recorded in the records, and this, of course, will be of help. Another source which can be of value in determining the stands taken by the politicians is that of petitions to the General Court from the various towns concerned with the great issues of the day and signed by the leading men of the town, including those who sat in both houses of the General Court. The archives of the state of Massachusetts contain much material which has never been printed concerning the major issues of the period and the passage of legislation by both houses of the General Court. In addition to these sources, there is the body of private papers, printed and unprinted, such as the Winthrop and Randolph papers which will be a valuable source. The Massachusetts Historical Society has in its collections the papers of the Minot, Saltonstall,

Appleton, Quincy and Hutchinson families--all of which will be of use.

I cannot now state definitely whether there were political groupings prior to 1660, or whether there were moderates and puritans in the post 1660 period. If there were, my research to date indicates that perhaps one unifying factor within the group has been greatly ignored up until now. Previous works dealing with the question have seen the bond of party unity in religion (second generation lukewarm puritans and non-churchmembers versus the puritans) or in economics (merchant versus farmer). All, to my knowledge, have ignored family ties. To me it seems significant that the four men usually cited as the leading moderates in the upper house--Simon Bradstreet, Daniel Dennison, John Woodbridge, and Joseph Dudley--were all related. Three were sons-in-law of former governor, Thomas Dudley, and one was his son. It seems to me that the role played by family interests in the politics of Seventeenth century Massachusetts must be investigated.